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They call it

LITTLE CHRISTMAS

by DANIEL A. LORD, S.J.

That
Whether It Be Christmas Day
or
Little Christmas
The Savior of the World
May Show Himself
Lord of Your Life
and
Lover of Your Soul
Is the Wish of

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They Call It Little Christmas

By DANIEL A. LORD, S. J.

'TIS strange, said my friend the learned priest, 'tis strange indeed that they persist in calling it Little Christmas. It fits the glorious feast but badly.

I ventured to remind him that these days almost everyone calls that day the feast of the Epiphany.

'Tis well they do, he agreed, for a beautiful and dignified name that is. Epiphany, the showing forth of the Lord; that's what the beautiful Greek word means. Or it could mean the manifestation of the blessed Child that was born.

Yet little Christmas it remains in many a Catholic country, and I like to think that the adjective is a term of affection. The word little is often used like that.

Or they call it Twelfth-night, as Shakespeare loved to do. A wonderful night, twelve after the Lord was born, when the Star appeared to the Wise Men of the East, and they came — camel bells tinkling through the night air — their old bright eyes shining to reflect the Star they followed . . . until the Savior showed Himself at long last to these princes of the truth-hungry Gentiles.

YET Little Christmas is a poor name indeed for a feast that is among the world's greatest — perhaps for us, scions of the Wise Men, the very greatest. For it is our world that finds the day memorable, the world that belongs to us who once upon a time were known as the Nations seated in darkness and knowing little of the true God.

If in the whole calendar we have a feast to give us joy, my friend, if there is a day that should make our hearts take fire, even from that spark of heaven that the love of God lighted over a desert and set atop a mountain stable, that feast is the Epiphany. 'Tis ours by right of heritage and our legacy of faith.

Christmas itself was for Mary and the humble Joseph. Yes and 'twas for the angels who, old as they were, had yet to see the wonderful thing that was a Baby who was God, and a maiden who was God's dear Mother, and the eternal Word that had been their music and their poetry since God first called them out of nothingness—a Baby now sighing. His first human sigh and sobbing His first human sob as He rested wordless and without speech upon the straw of a stable.

No wonder they talked in exclamations... Glory!... Peace!... God!

CHRISTMAS, Big Christmas I shall call it, since you insist on calling the Epiphany Little Christmas...

I protested gently that I did not so insist, but he insisted on disregarding my protest. And who was I to interrupt a thought or contradict a text?

Big Christmas then was for the shepherds, bless their eager hearts and their listening ears and their swiftly running feet.

For that matter 'twas for the dwellers in Bethlehem — had their hearts been less hard than the cobbles of their Roman roads, and their ears less weary with too much nonsense, and their feet less tired with running after the things not worth the catching. Poor lads that they were...and for that matter poor maids and matrons, poor old men and children. They laughed vacantly, with little cause for mirth, and played foolishly, with little excuse for joy, and slept long and heavily because life was so empty, and cooked vast dinners for tiresome relatives who never repaid the hospitality. And all the while their hope and their salvation and reason enough and cause enough for all the joy in the world was waiting for them just a short walk away.

Poor little Child that waited and waited in vain!

BIG Christmas, if you like the name, was first of all for the Jews.

Indeed for a while it looked as if we of the Gentiles had been forgotten even in the light of Christmas.

Sad is that thought, my friend . . . and sad is that possibility. To think that we of the Nations might have conquered the earth with our Roman armies and never been conquered by the love of the Infant Savior. To think that we of dear old Erin might have sung the songs of our bards and played the harp that rang through Tara's hall and never lifted our voices to sing the Christmas high Mass or join in the *Adeste* of the Christmastide.

Aye and the Christmas trees might have lifted their laden branches in tribute to thickheaded gods of Valhalla . . . and Christmas tapers might have been lighted by foolish old Druids, who knew all about stars but nothing about heaven, who talked to gods that did not live in the trees they revered as the homes of those gods and never heard of the God who planted the forests and bade oak trees lift great reaching arms in search of Him.

'Twas a sad and dangerous twelve days, my friend. I shudder when I think of what might have been . . .

perhaps I should say of what might not have been. Too, too long your world and mine had been a hollow place, with no laughter of the saints and no rushing sound of angels' wings. Greece that was ours had grown fat on art and philosophy and grown lean for lack of beauty and truth. Rome was steel-muscled and knew the ways of the law, but she was slack in soul and ignorant of the law of the Eternal. Far off in Britain tribesmen painted their bodies blue and drank themselves stupid to forget how vile was the weather. And there was Persia, that gave us mathematics and China, old before Damascus—ancient city of our world—was founded.

And all of them—our fathers, my friend—crouching in the shadow of death, and shouting hollow prayers in empty temples, and spilling sacrificial blood for which there were no purpose and no reward.

Dear God in heaven, was it to go on that way?

Dear God on earth, had you been born only for the already saved?

AND I shudder when I think of it, and then I thank God for what they call—how strange man's choice of words!—Little Christmas.

Sure and on that day there were many questions answered forever.

For there were many questions yet to be asked.

Was the great God of heaven and earth the sole possession of one small people?

Was salvation that rose from the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to remain forever the property of their sons alone?

Was the newborn Christ destined to save only those who boasted themselves already saved, or almost saved?

What of the great outside world? What of the hunger for God that stalked the earth as men grew wearied unto death of the pitiful squabbings of petty dieties?

Was man's longing for truth, a longing made the more keen as the greatest philosophers offered only crumbs, to go unsatisfied?

Was the future, like the past, to go for millions God-less?

How soon were the doors of the Temple to be opened to mankind and easy access made possible even to the throne of God?

MIND you, there were some noble pagans who struggled with bloodied hands and broken nails and aching muscles to find a little corner in the light of God's countenance. Geniuses, you'd call them in any nation, saints perhaps as far as nature unaided makes a saint. But what a pitiful few among the masses, a handful among the nations, a luminous dozen out of all the sons of men who crawled the earth and found it meaningless.

Poor Gentiles, long and bitterly scorned . . . lost breed without the law . . . races that had wandered since the curse of Babel . . . peoples who knelt to gods of their hands' own carving, who hammered out of gold and brass the ugly things they worshiped and knew nothing of a gracious Father who is in heaven.

Yes they were anxious days, those twelve days, while we waited in the persons of our ancestors. Could it be that even the Christ of Christmas was meant for Jews alone? Angels had seen Him, and the shepherds, and the lovely Mary, and the lucky Joseph, and perhaps a scant scattering of Bethlehemites who had rallied some few grains of sense, the poor dears.

But then we knew.

THE Star, messenger to a land of believers who did not care, turned in its course and spoke to those who hoped for they knew not what. Far, far away from the Temple of Jerusalem, leagues outside the tight little boundaries of Judea, well beyond the Jordan and the protecting hills of Galilee, too far now for priestly eyes to see and scorn, out of the ken of Pharisee and Sadducee it broke again over the world. Downward it dropped over a rooftop where wise representatives of our races scanned the skies, tried to cut through the purple drapes held in

place with stars, searched for whatever might lie beyond.

It came, my friend, and with it came the birthday of the Gentiles.

For, thanks be to God, 'twas to pagans that the Star came—to men of false gods and ancient superstitions; to men scorned of the true believers and rejected by the law; to men and women who lifted their children to look upon idols that had eyes that did not see, and lips that did not speak, and ears that lent no attention to the worshipers, and arms that could not bless, and devilish souls that laughed at this parody on religion and this humiliation of mankind.

To the most pagan of the pagans it came, a Star that was promise of faith, fulfillment of hopeless hope, and sign of God's love for these His lost children.

AH WHAT a day was that, the first Epiphany. At last the showing forth of the Lord. After the black years the manifestation of God to the dwellers in blackness... gener-

ously the arms of the Father opening to welcome back His prodigal sons and daughters . . . Christ calling across the miles with the promise of His joyous revelation.

Indeed 'twas a great day for us, my friend, this Christmas of the Gentiles, the birthday of the King in the midst of the peoples He had not forgotten.

IT COULD have been—or do you think so?—that the Jews traveled so slowly to their King that the King came seeking those who would travel faster. For the wise old men who scanned the stars were younger than the young men of Israel who scanned their swelling purses. Perhaps after twelve weary days the Lord grew tired with His chosen people, who were too, too busy with monstrous trifles to offer a welcome to His Son.

For a fortnight and two days He had challenged them to leave their flocks and herds, their fields and shops, the bazaars and treasuries—to find the riches and the power and

the majesty of the ages. And that is a long time even for God, the patient.

So He swung His Star outward from the narrow limits of Israel to the vastness of the pagan world. And the people of the pagan world were waiting.

GLAD we can be, we of the Gentile world, that the first sight of the Star set ancient feet to traveling. We can be happy that our ancestors leaped to their fullest heights, cried aloud in gladness, summoned their servants, saddled their camels, stripped their strongboxes to provide gifts, and in a flash were off across a world to find the world maker, out of the darkness that would never close again and into the light that had been kindled by God's own Star.

So it was that through these ancestors of ours we came to find our King, the King of all the world.

Great words these, and great words we use for the event that for us changed all history: the mani-

festation of God to the Gentiles; the finding of the Lord; the showing forth of the King of Kings to those who were sick of the kings of earth and longed to pledge allegiance to the world's greatest and gentlest sovereign; the birthday of our faith; the dawning of our hope. All this it was indeed, though the men who knelt at the crib had known but vaguely the true God. Now they knew His precious Son. When they rose from adoring Him, never again would the pagan world relish its idols or serve them with willing strength.

EASY 'twould be to linger there and softly speak those mysteries. The Child was wrapped in swaddling clothes, but the knowledge of Him and His Father had broken through the swaddling clothes of the Old Law to expand across the world. Long before His wonderful parable the Lord of the wedding feast had gathered literally from the highways those halt and lame, poor and blind whom the Jews regarded as the religious outcasts of the world.

TO OUR lasting honor let's recall that our ancestors came with full hands. They brought all they knew of the earth's best to lay before the throne that was a manger.

My learned priest friend thumbcd his breviary with expert skill until he found and read: "The kings of Tharsis and the island bring their gifts. The kings of Arabia offer their presents."

Indeed not empty-handed, but hoping to return gift for gift, generosity for divine generosity.

Again my friend read from his breviary.

I'll translate it freely. "When the Wise Men saw the Star, they said one to the other, 'Surely this is the sign of a great king. What can we do if not hurry to learn about Him? And it is right to offer Him our gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh'."

They were generous souls, those forerunners of all those generous souls who out of pagan lands brought first the gift of themselves,

then the gifts of their wisdom and poetry, then the gift of their simple, loving hearts, and last of all rich gifts that the world prizes because they are rich and that God regards because they are symbols of things beyond price — gold, perfume, rare spices.

Again my priest friend located a place in that beloved book.

"Arise, be ye illuminated, filled with light, O Jerusalem! For your light cometh, and the glory of the Lord has risen above you."

'Twas Isaias who spoke thus. But it might well have been the Wise Men too. For be sure they cried aloud as they rode through the sleeping towns of Judea, shouting the good news to the wide-eyed merchants in the villages, stopping the caravans to let them in on the secret that blazed in the heavens. Be sure that they were crying this wonder when they dashed into the presence of Herod. With the priests they may have spoken more quietly, for they would have been certain that these representatives of God knew far

more about the tidings than did they, guardians as these priests were of the Word and the law and the house of God that waited for the divine King and high priest.

BUT how sad their disillusionment. Indeed and indeed their journey must have been one long and cruel amazement. If the Star was faithful, what of the unfaithfulness of God's people? If the Star moved so fast before them, the people moved not at all. If the Star proclaimed the long expected King, King Herod could not conceal his anger at the proclamation. If the Star brought them to the Temple, the guardians of the Temple disdained the Star and moved not the few steps necessary for the finding of Him whom the Star announced.

But despite apathy and delay and cold cynicism and the smell of dead and dying faith all about them, they found Him, these ancestors of ours, found Him for themselves and for us and were glad beyond the compass and power of words.

They had brought their ancient wisdom to the stable, and from a little Child they had learned at last true wisdom. They had left their books and scrolls—and they knew in the light of His eyes that they had little further use of them. As they had searched their books of philosophy, they had found Him there, vague and cloudy but still there. Now they found Him face to face, and philosophy gave place to theology as they stopped the search for their God and started to dream and think and talk and teach about Him.

THE Epiphany, the finding of all that the hunger of men's hearts had craved, the revelation of infinite love and mercy to the children who had forgotten Him and whom He had seemed to forget, the manifestation of God-made-man, after whose pattern man would be made, like God.

A great day, my friend, so great indeed that into the feast the Church has crammed, if you stop to think, three feasts.

Indeed yes; three feasts, and all of them closely intertwined.

The coming of the Magi and the birthday of Christ for the Gentiles . . . that is the first.

The first . . . but just part of that wondrous day. Surely you recall the other two.

Again he flipped the pages of his darkly thumbled breviary and swiftly found the place.

Again I translate freely and to the sense rather than the words. 'Tis here in the antiphon of the priest's Lauds.

"This is the day, the very day when the Church was united with her divine bridegroom." I pause on that, for it is the veriest truth: That Church made up of the races and the Nations, hurrying now across the desert to find like a bride the one she loves. But I continue: "Today in the Jordan, Christ feels the water of John's baptism wetting His hair. Today the Magi run with their gifts to the heavenly wedding feast. And today the marriage of Cana grows

gay as it drinks the wine that lately had been water."

There you have it. *My friend the scholarly priest smiled a happy smile.* Three feasts in one, and each the showing forth of the Lord, each a new manifestation of God, each a fresh apparition of the Savior to His people, each a calling out to the waiting world.

WISE is our Church in that she linked on this blessed Twelfth-night three wonders, each on the surface so different from the others and underneath so much the same, separated in time and yet close in meaning, different in background and in all save the central character yet closely united in purpose: the Magi, John's baptism of Christ, and Cana.

I wonder now: Is there another feast like this one? Indeed I doubt it.

In its simplest meaning it recalls the coming of the Wise Men and that Epiphany that was the revelation of Christ to you and to me and to all of us among the Nations.

Then it summons us to the banks of the Jordan and bids us watch the heavens split by the thundering voice of God as Christ steps into the water, as the humble John wets the Savior's head in his baptism, and as the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descends upon the Son of God.

Finally it brings us to the scene of that first of Christ's miracles, the changing of water into wine, the miracle that opened His public life.

THE first Epiphany was a clear showing forth of the Lord. But do you see the wonder of that manifestation there on the banks of the Jordan?

Up to that moment only one out of all mankind fully understood the greatness of the Savior, and she a woman, Mary by name, Mother by divine profession. Once before she had been shown the meaning of the Trinity, when 'twas revealed to her in Nazareth on that miraculous day we call the Annunciation. For the messenger had come from God her Father, outrider to the Holy Spirit

working in her body the miracle that brought her the living presence of God's Son, now her Son as well. The Trinity was like a precious secret that God had shared first with Mary.

Now the Trinity is for all the world. There on the Jordan is the showing forth of God to all who care to watch and listen and for all who in the days that followed read the Book of the Gospels or heard the glorious teaching of the Church.

The showing forth goes on. For the greatness of the Savior is manifested by the shining humility of John. The forerunner kneels, and before the multitudes who reverence him he proclaims that he, than whom none greater had been born of woman, was not worthy to untie the strap of the newcomer's sandal.

Christ was manifested by the voice of God crying from the heavens: "This is my beloved Son . . . hear ye Him."

Could it be that the Trinity came clearest to men on this day that we

call the Epiphany? The Trinity and the wonder of God's greatness, His unique nature. . . . For great as men had always known the true God to be, now they saw a little more clearly His wondrous richness. Here was the striking showing forth of the Trinity—the voice of God the Father, the living presence of God the Son, the coming of the indwelling God who is the Holy Spirit.

Suddenly men who had known always that their God was one God now knew that the God of love was three Persons bound together in mystery and perfect unity in their love one for another and in their love of man.

THERE remains that third manifestation, the miracle of Cana. And again it was an Epiphany, a showing forth of the Lord.

The miracles that are the Savior's, as you well enough know, my friends, were never like the tricks of magicians and fakirs. Indeed they

were not. If He worked a wonder, it was to put proof upon a hard truth. If He lifted a sick body, it was to show that He had power to heal a sicker soul. If He gave back life, it was to show that He was the very way, the truth, the life. If He fed the multitudes with loaves and fishes, it was to demonstrate that God, who filled the earth with food for His children, will care for human hunger even when it means the setting aside of the ordinary course and flow of nature.

Each miracle was another manifestation, a manifestation of Christ's power, of Christ's truth,

Yet of all His miracles that of Cana was the first. It was a great moment there at Cana when the Lord began to show forth His power and to prove Himself the master of matter no less than the Savior of souls.

DO YOU recall the lovely, simple scene?

All eyes were on that other bridegroom, the one who sat beside his

little bride and was content and sweetly prideful. All eyes were drawn to the banquet board, as all hands stretched out to reach the food of the banquet. I doubt me that many paid heed to the man and His Mother and the poorly dressed companions who as yet hardly knew themselves as Disciples.

Christ was in the midst of them as one they knew not. He was their eternal bridegroom, the lover of their souls. His was the power that had filled the earth with food, scant samples of which now rested briefly upon the banquet table. He had given to wine its warmth and sweetness and power to console. He was present at the feast in the hope that He would win their loyalty, and He found them wrapped in the love of woman and the greed for food and drink.

So it came about that He worked the first of His miracles, made the first public manifestation of Himself to the people.

WELL you know the course of it. The bridegroom, his eyes only for his bride, suddenly knows shame as the wine runs low and finally gives out. The bride sees her wedding day spoiled, for already the neighbors have begun to laugh behind their hands and mock her poverty. The butler is distracted. The servants wave futile hands.

But a woman sees and is sorry, sees and takes steps.

Quietly she speaks to her Son a request simple yet daring, easy yet in a sense disturbing to His arranged plan.

For the public life of Christ had not as yet really begun. He was but on the threshold. Much had to be done by way of preparation. These green and raw Apostles were too newly chosen to know the value and hidden depths of miracles. In His divine plan miracle and sermon were usually to be linked, the wonder of His deeds supplementing the greater wonder of His words.

Yet He smiles at His Mother, who knows that her wish for another is

granted and the wedding festivities are saved.

"Aquae rubescent," my friend the priest read from his breviary. A lovely phrase indeed. How did the poet translate that? "The modest waters saw their God and blushed."

MANIFEST now is the power of God and of His Son, Jesus Christ. Water obeys Him and changes its nature. The slow processes by which wine grows mellow work with more than speed of thought there in the tall cool water jars.

Manifest now is the love of the bridegroom even for this poor wedded couple and the little company of peasants and farmers and shopkeepers who had too greedily consumed the feast.

Manifest is His obedient love for His Mother as He sets aside His own plan to accede to her request.

Manifest is He to His amazed Disciples, who see the miracle and respond with a burst of faith that may

waver but will never again fall to ruin.

Manifest to that little gathering is the Savior who has come into the world, come with power in His hands and love in His heart and infinite compassion guiding Him along the paths of humanity's joys and sorrows.

Blessed miracle of Cana, again the showing forth of the Lord our God!

YES 'tis a great feast that we call Epiphany, and I do not like it much when they call it Little Christmas.

True, to that first Christmas we shall always give the joyous love of our Christian souls. But that first pouring out of love need not be the only love. For twelve days later Christmas comes again, and again does Christ enter the world that He made, showing forth His glory and His sweetness.

Christ enters the vast world of the Gentiles.

And as the day progresses, He enters into the Jordan, and the Trinity is shown forth for the adoration of men.

He seats Himself at a little wedding feast in Cana, and His public life begins, with that glorious manifestation of Himself through a miracle that anticipated the wonders yet to come.

Deeply I love the Epiphany, and so do all who understand its full richness.

It is Christmas for us whose forebears were Gentiles. It is Christmas for us who shall always find Christ in our own baptism and in His own baptism.

It is Christmas when we look upon the bridegroom of our souls and know that He loves us to the showing forth of His miracles.

Call it Little Christmas if you must.

Love it, for it is three feasts in one, Christmas repeated: the day of Magi, Trinity, and Cana's miracle.

ERIZMAN

